ANOTHER PERSON'S POINSON: A HISTORY OF FOOD ALLERGY BY MATTHEW SMITH (NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015).

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"To eat is human, to digest, divine": Mark Twain's characterization of dining seems just to most of us. Yet had he considered food allergies, he would need to have added a postscript. While digesting certain foods is conducive to heavenly pleasures for some, it can mean hellish agony to others. Twain shall be forgiven. Indeed, paediatrician Clemens von Pirquet only coined the term allergy four years before Twain's passing, namely in 1906; closely followed by Nobel Prize winner and physiologist Charles Richet's introduction of the term anaphylaxis. Enter Matthew Smith, more than a century later, who joins his former advisor Mark Jackson (*Allergy: A History of a Modern Malady* (2006) and *Asthma: The Biography* (2009)) in exploring the history of allergies. And indeed, Smith commends an illuminating in-depth look at the tumultuous history of one of the more divisive member of the allergy family.

Smith is aware of how allergies have been cast in dramatic language. The title alone suggests that we are dealing with a serious matter – and a complex one to be sure. Like all the best historical accounts, Smith brings a world to life around its protagonists – patients, parents, the orthodox allergists, food allergists, clinical ecologists and the various industries which all have their fingers in the food allergy pie. He makes a great sales pitch at the start, immersing the reader into an AC/DC concerts that gives the song *Highway to Hell* a new dimension: by adding peanuts to the equation. What follows is a careful outline of the medical and non-medical interpretations, past and present, of allergic reactions to such a seemingly harmless thing as food.

Smith begins by discussing how for millennia before the coinage of the term allergy, foods had caused a wide range of unexpected symptoms. They were named idiosyncrasies and though reported accounts of bizarre reactions were rarer, the debates were no less controversial. Smith's accounts

show how the distinctions between normal and pathological reactions to food are and never were far from clear. And perhaps, I might add, it is the unhelpful assumption that these two states are mutually exclusive which complicates the debate to no avail.

The second chapter charts the emergence of food allergies as a specific field of medical investigation. Smith skilfully demonstrates how during this "time of rapid transformation in Western medicine, a period of professionalization and specialization" (p. 47) the diagnoses of allergies and anaphylaxes may have given the field initial legitimacy, but they would not settle a debate that had never been settled to begin with. Clinicians were less concerned with a clear diagnosis than with identifying the foods that put their patients at risk. "Laboratory researches, in contrast, were intimately involved in searching for the precise immunological mechanisms" (p. 45), Smith observes. He then further addresses the gulf between orthodox and food allergists. How both sides defined, explained and remedied food allergies would mark the way food allergies were understood and misunderstood throughout the twentieth century. Meanwhile, a buffet of new actors from the food, chemical and pharmaceutical industries seized on this scientific vacuum. And new disciplines entered the discourse. Clinical ecologists, for instance, "began speculating that food allergy symbolized humanity's increasingly strained relationship with the environment" (p. 13). Smith further recounts how the discovery of *immunoglobulin E* initially promised to bridge the scientific, and to some extent ideological, chasm between conventional and food allergies. Yet, whereas the discovery bore deep theoretical significance, the therapeutic promise never materialised. Indeed, IgE turned out to be a less than straightforward measure of food allergy and a problematic target of therapy. It is in the final chapter where Smith reaches his grand finale, by reintroducing the peanut and showing how it became grist for the mill of food allergists. The sudden emergence of the anaphylactic peanut allergy in the 1990's, we learn, finally allowed allergists the long-sought public profile and medical status they had craved.

The depth and breadth of the field is vast and Smith does an excellent job of helping the readers navigate through the maelstrom of claims and counter-claims. He also reserves plenty of criticism for

what he refers to as the “mainstream medical community” (p. 188), calling for more research, “no matter how uncomfortable the answers are” (p. 190). In turn, there are minor caveats to Smith’s own book. Probably wisely, Smith states that he does not attempt to resolve the debates about food allergies or “even more foolishly” (p. 191) suggest an explanation why food allergies are on the rise. I wish he had been bolder with respect to possible social and cultural explanations – whether it be the growing nutritional gap or the link between allergy and mental disturbances. It would also have been valuable had he shared the limelight with food allergy’s often-overlooked sibling food intolerance, as the comparison is a useful reminder that in this fast-moving, complex field, nuance is everything. Ultimately, however, Smith’s book is a rich, thoughtful and accessible addition to the history of medicine. It is also a gripping work of social commentary, full of twists and surprises, which will undoubtedly stimulate further debate - on and off the dinner table.

Bibliography:

Jackson, Mark. 2006. Allergy: A History of a Modern Malady. London: Reaktion Books.

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